

### Which model for Europe? The DGAP discusses a British-German agenda for Europe

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## Which model for Europe?

The DGAP discusses a British-German agenda for Europe

*Disappointed by the Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty, both British and German governments are seeking ways to counter stagnation within the EU. What potential—indeed, what political will—exists for a deeper Anglo-German cooperation, and how can this be utilized to push Europe forward? Constructive bilateral relations would undoubtedly promote mutual interests whilst also benefiting multilateral efficiency. And common interests do exist: on areas such as climate change or Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom see eye to eye. Changes of leadership have also helped patch up relations since the era of Schröder and Blair. Yet the two nations approach Europe in exceedingly different ways. The respective impulses which led them to join the European project in the first place still govern the way in which each perceives its place in Europe, and Europe's place in the world. Germany and the UK do not share the same basic views on issues as fundamental (and as divisive) as enlargement, Turkey, policy towards Russia—in short, on what Europe is for. This was above all evident in Jim Murphy's vision of the EU, presented at the DGAP on June 30th, 2008, one which, if in doubt, places functionality above institutions—a Europe that can deliver.*

### The instincts driving EU policy

Anglo-German relations receive little attention, despite being two of the largest member states without whom the EU could not function, and who with France form the “big three” of Europe. No formal basis exists for high-level British-German meetings, though informal talks do take place; both nations have historically prioritized relations with France. This is changing to some extent. Franco-German relations have cooled over the last few years, and Angela Merkel has built up a relationship of mutual respect with Gordon Brown. The visit by Jim Murphy (UK Minister for Europe) to his counterpart in Berlin in late June 2008 also points to a genuine interest in cultivating closer ties.

Yet to drive a common European agenda requires a common vision of Europe, and here lies the problem. Germany pursues the ideal of an “ever closer

union”, still inspired by the same reasons that led to the founding of the European project fifty years ago. Consequently, Germany sometimes appears attached to the idea of “Europe for the sake of Europe”. The UK, on the other hand, joined Europe primarily for functional reasons, and still mainly assesses the EU on what it can deliver for its citizens. Murphy admitted that the UK is “much more interested in the Lisbon agenda for jobs and growth than in the Lisbon Treaty—by instinct”. It is these “instincts” on both sides which continue to govern European policy, and which manifest themselves in diverging policies, for example, on energy or defense. While common interests do exist—we all want security and stability—Europe's precise role in such matters is disputed. This fundamental disagreement on the purpose of Europe subsequently impacts upon political will to work towards a common agenda—and does little to counter institutional stagnation.

## Policy priorities

Of course, one should not underestimate the areas of agreement, where consensus is reached quickly between the UK and Germany. For Günter Gloser (German Minister for Europe), the UK and Germany represent the “decisive motors” behind climate policy; the commitments secured during last year’s Spring Council are testament to this. While Murphy approached the issue from a more economic perspective, for example in his ambitions to raise the number of “green collar workers” to one million in the next two decades, environment policy is clearly one area where Germany and the UK want to take a leading role. Equally, the focus of Merkel and Tony Blair on Africa during their respective G8 presidencies, and the by now converging approaches towards the United States are indicative of similar policy priorities. Great Britain, said Murphy, may take a rather more “pragmatic” approach to Europe, but it is “still passionate about creating a ‘model Europe’—a force for good in the world”. Both governments frequently reiterate the desire for a Europe that can act on the world stage; neither wants, as one participant put it, after Robert Kagan, a Europe that is “like the chorus in a Greek tragedy—commenting on events but with little or no impact on the outcome.” Cooperation within the so-called EU-3 (with France) in dealing with Iran is one example of the added value of teaming up.

That said, substantial differences of approach arise in areas such as energy policy, defense and social policy. Mr. Murphy spelled out clearly the British commitment to further liberalization of energy markets; Germany and the UK may have the same overarching needs, but this does not mean they agree on how to fulfil them. British analysts still hold Germany largely responsible for the lack of a common EU Russia policy, even if Germany has modified its position in recent years. It remains to be seen what emerges from the negotiations for a new partnership agreement with Russia. Germany is also seen as an obstacle from the UK perspective in reaching a common defense policy. The British are bewildered by Germany’s reluctance to invest more

in defense: does Germany simply wish to become “a big Switzerland”? In the ten years that have passed since the St. Malo agreement, there is still no common strategic defense culture in Europe, and from a British perspective, this is a responsibility which Germany in particular has shirked. Different visions are also evident in British and German perspectives of what a “social Europe” should look like. Social policy remains a national competence, and the UK emphasis on liberalization and flexible labor markets is not shared by Germany to the extent that Britain wishes. Hopes for Anglo-German cooperation to combat the anti-liberalization backlash may therefore prove unrealistic.

There does seem to be willingness on both sides to work through trickier issues. Gloser’s inclusion of justice and home affairs as an “area of cooperation” between Britain and Germany was less a recognition of past successes than an indication of future potential. But what concrete form would a deepened cooperation take? An institutionalized dialogue taking its cue from the multi-faceted Franco-German structures? High-level discussions on a formal basis would likely achieve less than informal meetings. And whereas creating the platform for talks would certainly force regular communication to take place, there is understandably a reluctance to set up an institution for its own sake. While the idea of a “big three” coalition with France was floated, policy-makers showed little support for publicly forming an “exclusive club”; in any case, behind the scenes such meetings already take place.

## Institutional reform—and the purpose of Europe

The results of the Irish referendum were acknowledged as symptomatic of a broader, Europe-wide dissatisfaction with the EU. But Germany and Britain have responded to the current paralysis in Brussels in ways which reflect their differing priorities. The British view is that Lisbon should not be overestimated: progress can still be made without it. Political will, much more so than institutions, is the deciding factor in making things happen. The German side tends to

see the issue from an institutional perspective. While Minister Gloser recognized that the reasons behind the Irish “no” had to be further analyzed, he expressed impatience to implement the Treaty, if only to be done with eight years of inaction. Understandably, most Europeans are tired of talking about institutions. But while the German government would rather push through the Treaty—seeing this as a precondition for further action—for Murphy, waiting around is not an option. This is not only because the issues themselves require urgent attention, but also because it is through its substance, rather than its institutions, that Europe remains relevant to its citizens. This concerns others, too. The new American president, trying to find his footing in relations with the EU, will be frustrated if Europe remains preoccupied with internal matters.

From the continental perspective, euroscepticism among the British public seems a lost cause; Murphy himself admitted that a recent poll found only 14% to be in favor of the ratification of the Reform Treaty. In Germany—as elsewhere—Gordon Brown is increasingly being dismissed as a “lame duck”. His recent decision to continue the ratification process was welcomed with gratitude by Germany, and seen as a sign that the UK government was, after all, committed to institutional reform. But this would be a dangerous assumption, not least given the Conservative party’s likely return to power. If even former Prime Minister Tony Blair—under much more favorable economic and political conditions—stopped short of moving Britain into “core” Europe, it is unrealistic to expect further rapprochement under less ideal circumstances. The Tories may see the EU in purely economic terms; as one commentator put it, “they just don’t get the political side of the EU.” But reluctance towards institutional change transcends party politics in Britain. Murphy was unequivocal in his insistence that Lisbon marks “the end of the era of institution-building”. The British government has no interest in more treaties.

How then does the UK envisage the EU in twenty years’ time? More effective, economically stronger—and continually expanding. German participants could not help but wonder at this attitude, seemingly all

about “enlargement, but for heaven’s sake no deepening.” Murphy reiterated the British commitment to opening the door to any state wishing to enter, providing membership criteria are fulfilled. This marks a drastic divergence from the German vision of Europe. This being the case—where does Turkey fit into the common agenda?—does political will even come into the question?

### Realistic expectations

Minister Gloser claimed that Anglo-German relations could become one of the most important pillars within Europe. Everyone is impatient to begin looking outwards again and to tackle issues of substance, our external partners included. But how can bilateral cooperation push Europe forward, when the two partners do not even agree where “forward” is? Admittedly, cooperation may be propelled by sheer necessity on matters such as security. But the division between a strategic or functional view of Europe (Murphy: “We will always ask whether EU activity and legislation adds value”) and an institutionally driven, idealistic view is not something that can be addressed by a mere change in national leadership. In this context, we should have realistic expectations of what can be achieved on a bilateral basis. The inherent difference of opinion that exists between the UK and Germany should at least serve to reassure those who are fearful of too much harmonization within Europe. It will certainly be some time before Europe looks all the same.

The conference took place on June 30th, 2008 at the DGAP in Berlin.

#### Speakers:

Jim Murphy, UK Minister of State and Minister for Europe  
Günter Gloser, German Minister of State for Europe

#### Panelists:

Charles Grant, Centre for European Reform, London  
Dominic Schroeder, The British Embassy in Berlin  
Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut, Federal Chancellery, Berlin  
Jan Techau, DGAP

Report compiled by Anna Patton